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SUBJECT Security Clearance Procedures

BRYANT GUMBEL: As this morning's news of yet another spy arrests suggests, America's top secret information is flowing into the hands of the Soviets at an alarming rate. Some of the best spies are Americans with high security clearances who sell the secrets. With the arrests of now four more Soviet agents, the number awaiting trial for crimes against the United States in this country has never been higher.

Senator Sam Nunn is senior Democrat of the Armed Services Committee. He has been critical of security clearance procedures. And he joins us this morning from our studios in Washington.

If in fact our classified information is under assault, how capable are we right now of withstanding that assault?

SENATOR SAM NUNN: Well, I think our counterintelligence has slowly improved over the last two or three years. I think the FBI's doing a better job. But we have a long way to go because we let down our guard for a long time in that counterintelligence area.

The other area that I think is equally important is the personnel security area, and that is the clearance procedure. You start with the proposition that we have an absurd number of people who are being cleared. We have 4.2 million people being cleared. Fifty-three percent of all Federal Government employees are being cleared. And to show you how that plays out, if right now we had no more requests for reclearance -- that is, for top secret and above we reclear every five years -- we would still take ten years just to handle the backlog.

So, we're in chaos in terms of the personnel security clearance procedure, and it starts with the problem of huge numbers. That has to be addressed.

GUMBEL: Well, are there no routine checks in place? I mean in the case of Mr. Whitworth, who was arrested on the Coast, the fourth arrest in this particular case, his clearance dates back from ten years. Why wasn't it routinely checked?

SENATOR NUNN: Well, Bryant, every five years you're supposed to have a check, a recheck of people that have top secret clearance or above. But that simply cannot be done because of the numbers. We've got a ten-year backlog in that. So it may be ten years now before we ever recheck someone else out there who has got that espionage urge.

That's a very, very serious problem. And you have to start, I think, by the President issuing an executive order directing all agencies and contractors to cut down the number of people who are being cleared. I would say a goal would be 50 percent. And he has to give them some incentive to do so.

GUMBEL: Is there a doorstep on which we could legitimately place the problem?

SENATOR NUNN: Oh, I don't think there's a political doorstep. No. I think it's been going on a long time. But the responsibility now is to correct the problem. It's obvious we have a very serious problem. I think the President has to take firm action. I certainly think the Congress ought to take a look at any kind of changes in laws that are needed. But primarily, I think it's not a matter of law, it's a matter of procedure and practice.

We've had about a 50 percent growth rate in the number of security requests for clearance that we have had from contractors just in the last four or five years. Now, that has gotten out of hand.

GUMBEL: The problem with reporting, of course, espionage stories is that you compromise security in the process of doing it. Just how badly has this nation been hurt by the efforts of these arrested in this particular spy case?

SENATOR NUNN: Well, I think the nation's been hurt very gravely by this recent episode. Our anti-submarine warfare and our capability under the sea is one of the great advantages we have over the Soviet Union. Obviously, they realize that. For a number of years they've been going after that information. We had not realized how much information they had gotten until this case came up, and we still don't know. It may be several months

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before we really can assess the damage. But without any doubt, it's been serious.

GUMBEL: Is it possible to even estimate the number of Soviets in this country who might be engaged in intelligence?

SENATOR NUNN: Well, I think you have to assume that all Soviets, one way or the other, are engaged in intelligence. We have some 1400...

GUMBEL: All of them?

SENATOR NUNN: Well, intelligence meaning, in the broadest sense, certainly they're getting all the information they can for their government. Whether it's spying or not is another question. But there are some 1400 that directly work here, and that doesn't count the Eastern Europeans.

One thing that is in the mill is to equalize the number of Americans who have access in the Soviet Union to the number of Soviets here. They have far more people here than we have there. And I think that's a good step in the right direction. Senator Leahy and Durenberger and others are taking the lead on that.

GUMBEL: If they have so many here and they're involved in intelligence, why do we seem to be catching so few?

SENATOR NUNN: Well, we're catching more all the time. But that may indicate that there are a lot more out there than we thought.

I think the counterintelligence has to be accelerated. But in an open society, we're not going to have a perfect system. What we have to do is cut down the incentive for people who have greed on their mind and who have criminal intent and who are willing to betray their country, we need to cut down their incentives.

One thing -- excuse me. Go ahead.

GUMBEL: I was just going to say as a final note, the potential solutions would seem to be impossible to effect very quickly. Does that mean that our state secrets will be in jeopardy for some years to come?

SENATOR NUNN: Well, I don't think we're ever going to have a perfect system. One thing I would offer. There was a very, I think, moving moment in terms of a spy telling his own story, Christopher Boyce, before our investigative subcommittee about a month and a half ago. If all the young people who are going into government and who are going to be cleared heard his

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story about the pains of being a spy, it might change a few minds out there.

Senator Sam Nunn, thank you very much.